



## **“We Make It Controversial” Elementary Preservice Teachers’ Beliefs about Race**

**By Lisa Brown Buchanan**

### **Introduction**

The impetus for this study began during an elementary teacher education course meeting, where, as the instructor, I listened to preservice teachers discuss whether or not it was appropriate to discuss controversial topics—including race—with young children. As the discussion progressed, I was troubled to hear preservice teachers disclose their “uncomfortableness” with race at large and emphasize that discussions about race in the elementary classroom were inappropriate. Their responses compelled me to thoughtfully consider how the topic of race, students’ experiences with race, and students’ ideas about the presence and function of race in school could be more deliberately woven into my courses in elementary teacher education.

In this short series of exercises about race, I aimed to engage my elementary preservice teachers in thinking about race as a concept, the presence and function of race in their own lived experiences, and their preconceived notions about race. Additionally, I hoped to pose questions that fostered their thinking about race while also positioning them to articulate their beliefs about race. Finally, I wanted to begin a conversation with undergraduate elementary preservice teachers that ultimately would continue and develop both throughout our semester together as well as in my future courses in elementary teacher education.

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## **Literature Review**

### **The Problem with Race**

Often considered a controversial topic too taboo for the classroom (Evans, Avery, & Pederson, 1999), race remains front and center in relation to daily life, teaching, and learning. Race is a continual influence of students' and teachers' lives, shaping how they understand themselves and others, impacting their lived experiences, and contributing to how they understand race. The influence of race also extends to schools, where White teachers continue to dominate the teaching force (Causey, Thomas, & Armento, 2000; Sleeter, 2001), widening the racial identity gap between increasingly diverse students and White teachers. For decades, teacher educators have urged fellow teacher educators and classroom teachers to recognize that race is and continues to be a persistently contentious topic in schools, one that is particularly glossed over or misunderstood by White preservice teachers (Grant, 1988; Haviland, 2008; Howard, 2006; King, 1991; Ladson-Billings, 1994, 1996; Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995).

Further complicating the classroom divide is the documented avoidance of race and perceived colorblindness among White teachers and preservice teachers (Howard, 2006; Howard, 2010; Ladson-Billings, 1994, 1999; Laughter, 2011; Williams & Evans-Winters, 2005). These factors point to a need for teachers to frequently examine race during the teacher education experience. Effective strategies for examining race in teacher education include structured seminars and deliberations (Buchanan, 2012; Hess, 2009; Parker, 2001; Parker & Hess, 2001) that position a shared text (e.g., written, filmic, or art text) to elicit shared dialogue, experiences that explicitly bridge coursework with the local community (Cooper, 2007), and structured reflection exercises (Brown, 2004; Dinkleman, 2003; Pewewardy, 2005). Additionally, deliberately couching these course exercises within preservice teachers' field experiences can help elicit more persistent engagement with race in teacher education.

In response, teacher educators propose preservice teachers should examine race as part of a larger construct of multicultural education within their teacher education program, a framework that they assert is central to understanding all other aspects of teachings and learning both in the teacher education program (Howard, 2010; Ladson-Billings, 1994, 1999; Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995; Milner, 2006; Sleeter, 1993, 2001; Ullucci, 2010) and in schools (James & Peterson, 2013; Landsman & Lewis, 2011). They recognized that teacher education provides a ripe location for moving such exercises with race into a deeper examination of the presence and function of race, including Whiteness, in education and society (Landsman & Lewis, 2011). In fact, Sleeter emphasizes that by not examining the presence and function of race in teacher education or avoiding such conversations, teacher educators are promoting the myth of colorblindness. Other researchers have echoed the impact of not examining race in teacher education, emphasizing the importance of creating frequent exercises with race and other components of diversity in teacher education

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(Brown, 2004; Cooper, 2007; Milner, 2006). As a whole, these scholars argue that teacher education programs should begin such work by asking preservice teachers to think about their own racial reality and to question their beliefs about race, then move to well-crafted opportunities within coursework to discuss the presence and function of race in their own lives and the lives of others.

On the other hand, the literature has consistently documented that conversations about race fall short of the potentially rich and problem-posing potential that teacher educators have in mind (Causey et al., 2000; Gomez & White, 2010; Kumar & Hamer, 2013; Sleeter, Torres, & Laughlin, 2004). As a result, some scholars propose specific strategies for achieving such discussions. Teacher educators who have created course experiences where preservice teachers examined race have used written reflections, autobiographical essays, peer journaling, urban field placements, and structured discussions (Gillespie et al., 2002; Kumar & Hamer, 2013; Laughter, 2011; Milner, 2006; Pewewardy, 2005; Ullucci, 2010). Most often, individual written reflections and shared discussions were identified as strategies for examining race in teacher education.

While positioning preservice teachers to examine race in teacher education is critical, challenges to the process have been identified. For example, most programs do not appear to offer a concrete focus on race (Gorski, 2009), and when such experiences are implemented (see for example Brown, 2004; Cooper, 2007; Pewewardy, 2005), they are often isolated experiences in single courses rather than part of a series of experiences across a program. Still, when race was positioned for study within a program, teacher educators and preservice teachers described either disinterest or uneasiness with the topic of race (Jennings, 2007) and preservice teachers' avoidance (Garrett & Segall, 2013) and claims of colorblindness seemed to further impair efforts to place the study of race in teacher education (King, 1991; Ladson-Billings, 1994, 1999; Laughter, 2011; Williams & Evans-Winters, 2005). Additionally, preservice teachers' prior experiences and dispositions towards race appear to impact how they approach race (Causey et al., 2000; Gomez & White, 2010; Sleeter et al., 2004; Zeichner, 2009) and discussing race can be difficult in settings where one race dominates the group, leading to such conversations being avoided or minimized (Darden, 2009; Glazier, 2003).

Moreover, the White dominance in elementary teacher education underscores the importance of crafting these experiences in elementary teacher education. If teacher education programs are to present a more deliberate examination of race across courses, teacher educators must understand preservice teachers' beliefs about race and how to use this knowledge to provide a more focused and meaningful investigation of these concepts in their individual and collective teaching. In summary, the scholarship related to preservice teachers and race demonstrates the need for deliberate experiences in teacher education that foster preservice teachers' thinking about race and offer frequent opportunities for preservice teachers to articulate their beliefs about race.

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Although these findings provide insight into studying race in teacher education, less is known about the extent of inquiry that students engaged during their programs or what is meant by students' lack of interest and discomfort with the topic. This suggests that further research focused on how race is examined in teacher education is necessary to understand the ways in which race is examined and to what extent preservice teachers are involved in negotiating race. While much can be derived from scholarship about preservice teachers' beliefs about race, some gaps exist. Research that identifies and articulates elementary preservice teachers' earliest experiences with race and their beliefs about discussing race with elementary students was not found. Additionally, scholarship that identifies and then examines preservice teachers' beliefs about who they would discuss race with and their level of ease with such discussions was not located.

In this study, I positioned three experiences with race into course meetings in an attempt to continually engage preservice teachers in identifying and articulating their beliefs about race, their childhood and schooling experiences with race, and their beliefs about discussing race. Three research questions guided the design and development of this descriptive case study (Yin, 2003):

1. What are elementary preservice teachers' experiences with race?
2. What are elementary preservice teachers' beliefs about race?
3. What are elementary preservice teachers' beliefs about discussing race?

## **Methodology**

### ***Study Setting and Participants***

Three undergraduate elementary methods courses at two mid-sized public universities in the Southeastern United States were the cases studied. Students enrolled in both universities' elementary education programs were clustered in a cohort design, taking methods courses together and attending internships with one another for 8-to-10 hours a week. Each of the courses met three hours a week. I served the dual role of the course instructor and the researcher for each course.

As Table 1 illustrates, the participants were incredibly homogeneous in race, gender, and age group. Each class was predominately White, female, and aged 18-24, which is typical in most preservice teacher programs in the United States (Causey

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**Table 1**  
***Preservice Teachers' Demographic Makeup***

Course	Total Students	F	M	Black	Latino	Multi-racial	White	18-24	25-40	Rank
Social Studies	28	27	1	0	0	0	28	27	1	Junior
Reading	12	11	1	0	0	1	11	11	1	Junior
Social Studies	22	20	2	0	1	0	21	20	2	Senior

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et al., 2000; Sleeter, 2001). Pseudonyms were used to protect the confidentiality of participants.

As the teacher and researcher, I was also a study participant. I am a White female, therefore I cannot effectively discuss the study methodology without acknowledging the presence and function of race and Whiteness in my own life (see, for example, Gillespie, Ashbaugh, & DeFiore, 2002; Landsman & Lewis, 2011; James & Peterson, 2013). My own positionality as a White woman teaching three White dominated groups of preservice teachers influenced the ways in which race and Whiteness operated in this study. Additionally, I recognize that I played an integral part in the case study implementation. Because of my dual roles, I was aware that I needed to be adaptive and flexible (Yin, 2003), and I took steps to minimize the threats to the study's credibility that were related to my dual roles in the study (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). For example, I designed data collection methods that were not linked to course grades or assignments. Additionally, the online discussions, questionnaires, and written reflections related to the study were part of a larger structure of regular course components rather than isolated experiences.

**Data Collection Methods and Analysis**

Data collection occurred in three separate courses. Social Studies Methods (Junior) occurred in Fall 2011 and Reading Methods (Junior) and Social Studies Methods (Senior) took place in Spring 2013. Building on the recommendations of Milner (2006), three data collection methods were utilized in this study: students' written reflections, online discussions, and a questionnaire. The questionnaire instrument completed in class offered Likert format responses and open ended questions, and responses were anonymous. The complete questionnaire is located in Appendix A. Narrative written reflections were completed outside of class in response to questions posed to students following class meetings. Although the reflections were not mandatory, more than half of the students submitted written reflections regularly. Using an online discussion forum, students took part in structured discussions (Hess, 2009) related to race, and the dialogues were then transcribed. Written reflections and online discussions were not anonymous. All written reflection and online discussion prompts are listed in Appendix B.

I analyzed the data using a constant comparative approach (Glaser, 1965; Glaser & Strauss, 1967). I began with an initial reading of the data which revealed broad data categories. I then completed initial coding, which involved developing multiple, narrow categories or codes across the three different data sources. Examples of initial codes included *fear of offending, relationship, and exposure*. After locating the initial codes, I repeated this process in an effort to identify codes that I did not see initially (Stake, 2006). Initial coding was followed with creating broad categories for the multiple codes. Examples of broad categories included *race as controversial, discussing race with families, and colorblindness*. Finally,

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I compared the codes to the three research questions in an effort to increase the credibility of the study (Yin, 2003, 2009).

#### ***Limitations of the Study***

The study design presents several limitations. First, the dynamics of a White instructor and researcher and predominantly White student body may have influenced the preservice teachers' willingness to participate and extent of participation. Also, given the duration of the study across a single semester rather than a comprehensive series of interrelated courses across a program, it is possible that the study did not accurately capture the preservice teachers' initial and resulting beliefs along a continuum of experiences. Furthermore, as the written reflections were not mandatory, it is possible that only a certain cross-section of students were represented in the written reflection data. Finally, because of the identifiers used in the online discussions, students may not have felt comfortable expressing their beliefs as openly in the online discussions as with the anonymous questionnaire. As coercion is a valid concern in researching teacher and student interactions and course experiences, it is important to recognize that students in this study did not complete the data sources as a part of their course grade. Instead, their course assignments and participation credit were drawn from other course experiences (Maxwell, 2005).

## **Findings**

Study data revealed preservice teachers' earliest experiences with race and three categories of preservice teachers' beliefs about race: race as a controversial topic, discussing race with different groups, and colorblindness and Whiteness.

#### ***Preservice Teachers' Earliest Experiences with Race***

Ninety-six percent of the preservice teachers in this study were White and their racial identities have influenced their life experiences with race. Through written reflections, the preservice teachers described their earliest experiences with race. The majority of preservice teachers stated that they did not have frequent opportunities to work and learn with students with different racial identities across their childhood and K-12 schooling. Instead, they went to school or lived in neighborhoods with predominately White peers. Preservice teachers who attended school with or live nearby children of different races described isolated or stereotypical accounts of race. For example, Meredith offered,

In my childhood and schooling, I remember just Black History month. I did not really have any experiences with race otherwise.

Jess shared,

There aren't too many black people where I'm from. It's weird thinking back now, but I remember in the cafeteria at lunch the black people would sit in their own

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section, two booths, and the Whites would have their own section. It's not that we all didn't get along, our friends just happened to be of our own color. I don't know why, but that's how it was. That's how it is for my entire community.

For several preservice teachers, the university was their first schooling experience with students with diverse racial identities. Abby wrote,

I grew up in a small town that was mostly middle class White people and my grandparents grew up during the civil rights time period and still had their negative perception of anyone other than White people. So coming to college was a whole new world for me because I got to see how different people are and I also go to appreciate race in a whole new light.

In contrast, a few students stated that their K-12 schooling and friendships included experiences with students of diverse races. For example, Emory shared,

As a child I grew up in a small neighborhood of all White boys and girls and a single African-American girl. I was fascinated by the few differences between myself and my African-American friend. Her mother made her wear a shower cap in the swimming pool to protect her hair. Some days she couldn't come outside to play because her mother would wash and style her hair for hours, and most summer days her parents wouldn't allow her outdoors until sunset. All of these differences had to do with her hair and skin which was different than mine. I found it very interesting and would ask her about it. She didn't mind answering at all. I also played with African-American and Hispanic children in school. I remember being best friends with an African-American girl in the third grade and going to her birthday party. She was like anyone else to me, although we belonged to different races.

Other preservice teachers described their families' attitudes about interracial friendships or retold childhood memories of overt racism. For example, Camila revealed that her neighborhood and schooling experiences were predominately White, with the exception of her friendship with one child:

During 8th grade, one of my friends, who was African American, stayed overnight with us a lot. She always felt comfortable around my family, and my parents always treated her like one of their own. However, my grandparents seemed to hold a different view about being associated with people of a different race. I'm pretty sure the first time that I brought my Black friend to my grandmother's house she almost had a heart attack. After she figured out that I was still going to bring her to family get-togethers, she finally started accepting her.

Jess shared a similar experience,

The one thing I remember about race from my childhood is my grandfather coming over to visit and we were watching Fresh Prince of Bel Air. He absolutely freaked out and asked my mom why she would let us watch a show with people 'like that' on it. He said something a little more vulgar than that, but I won't repeat it.

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As illustrated, they often shared vignettes of their family's inclusive or racist attitudes and beliefs about race and then articulated how those beliefs influenced their friendships and emerging beliefs during their formative years. For other pre-service teachers, specific experiences within the community during their childhood or teenage years influenced their attitudes and beliefs about race, especially as it related to the knowledge they were receiving in their teacher education programs. For example, one student described how she identified the function of race in her own K-12 schooling:

When I began my internships in this program, the schools were a complete culture shock for me. These schools have more White people than all of Washington County, and they have lights that work in the hallway, and classrooms full of supplies instead of a chalkboard and 20 broken desks. That is what our schools back home looked like. This semester, I am in a classroom with three Black children on the roster, where as I was used to being one of three Whites in my classes. So I am used to seeing firsthand how majority Black schools are funded, and I can see now how the only difference is race. Same state, same funding per student, but look at the difference between the schools! You can't tell me it doesn't have anything to do with race.

Years later, the university provided a number of preservice teachers with different peers than in their K-12 years. As Susanne explained,

I am so thankful that I had the opportunity to go away to college. It has greatly impacted my attitudes about race. I have many African American friends in [city] and have become a lot more open minded to differences among people.

Susanne also contrasted the differences between K-12 experiences and her internship classroom, stating "Through my internship I have the opportunity to work with students of all races and ethnicities." However, she acknowledged the potential influence of her family members' attitudes about race on her own beliefs about race and others. She stressed,

. . . and I always thought that the attitudes I've noticed in my family would rub off on me somehow. I was always afraid that it would impact how I treat certain students.

This divergence between her family attitudes/beliefs and personal attitudes/beliefs surfaced in course discussions and in Susanne's written reflections, suggesting that she recognized the potential impact of her family's beliefs about race on her own beliefs. While this is important, Susanne's responses did not indicate that she was beginning to think critically about the role of her own Whiteness and race in her teaching. Similarly, Jenn did not describe experiences in childhood with diverse peers or with examining race in school. Instead, she described how her university classes, including teacher education courses, offered opportunities to discuss race:

In college, I have had many influential experiences in which I was challenged to

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think about how different races of people are treated. Because I am from a small town, I did not really know what diversity truly was until I came to college. Professors in my foundations class and my social studies method course encouraged me to think about and consider race in a whole new perspective. Also, from these classes I learned to look at issues from different perspectives like what the stories are telling you, and what is still missing.

In summary, preservice teachers' statements about early experiences that influenced their attitude about race suggest that they either interacted with children of a different race frequently during childhood and adolescence, or they exclusively lived nearby and attended school with other Whites. Additionally, other preservice teachers discussed their first experiences with racial diversity occurring in college. Their earliest race experiences seemed to influence the preservice teachers' current attitudes and beliefs about race.

**Preservice Teachers' Beliefs about Race: Race as a Controversial Topic**

Across the three groups of preservice teachers, preservice teachers frequently referred to race and discussions about race as controversial, problematic, uncomfortable, and potentially offensive. In a questionnaire response, 91% preservice teachers strongly agreed or agreed that race is controversial. Table 2 includes representative quotes from questionnaires denoting race as controversial.

In an online discussion, students cited contesting viewpoints and varying components of fear (e.g., fear of offending) as central to race being controversial. Students' explained:

*Jenn:* I think it depends on what perspective a person is getting at, and ultimately, who is involved.

*Lauren:* I think race can be controversial, but I don't see it the same way some others do.

*Susanne:* If it's controversial, then obviously the person is afraid of the unknown.

*Meredith:* It has always been controversial and it always will be.

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**Table 2**  
**Preservice Teachers' Beliefs about Race as Controversial**

It is always hard to talk about opinions with opposing views.  
People have all been raised differently and hold strong to their feelings about this topic.  
Everyone is raised differently.  
Lots of people have strong opinions.  
Race has always been controversial and always will be.  
It is, even though it shouldn't be.  
I think it is even more controversial in the South than in the North, although it's present there.

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*Blair:* We make it controversial.

Similarly, students contended that race incites uncomfortable feelings during conversations, often garnering their avoidance. Students maintained,

*Maura:* No one ever discusses it!

*Jenn:* I think it is even more controversial in the South than in the North; although it is definitely present it the North.

*Jess:* It's very controversial because some people can be very close-minded; I don't think it should be, and maybe it wouldn't be if you provide an environment that is accepting of all differences....but that's not always going to happen.

*Skyler:* It always has been avoided and it always will be. It's touchy, because people don't want to offend anyone.

*Camila:* No one wants to really confront that the issue still exists.

Still, other preservice teachers suggested that teachers' ideologies about race influenced how race operates in the classroom. Caroline explained:

I have found that in my internships, the children that the teachers have the most problems with are African American. And to be honest, I am only there one and a half days a week, so I tend to take on the same feelings as my cooperating teacher when it comes to what students are like, because I don't have a lot of other interactions with our students yet. So what does that mean? Does that mean that Black students are bad? That they are always in trouble? Or is the result of how teachers, how we see students? I mean, isn't race a factor here?

In her written reflection, Skyler wrote about the function of teachers' ideas about race. She shared how an elementary teacher that she worked with one semester openly used racist remarks during a grade level meeting, emphasizing how race operates in how students are viewed and discussed. She shared,

In one of our recent grade level meetings, a teacher was talking about a student's name, and the spelling and pronunciation. She described it as "a bunch of ghetto mess." She was saying it as an ending statement to her ongoing rant about how parents should spell names phonetically as much as possible and without extra letters. I was offended by her description of the student's name; it made me feel like she just said that because the student was Black, and I felt like she was implying that Black parents are less educated compared to other parents. During that grade level meeting, I realized that I am not "in Kansas anymore" and that teachers, too, can be racist. For me, it was a reminder that I will always encounter people who I don't agree with on the issue of race, and people who teach elementary school who are racist, and sometimes, I won't really know where they stand on race until something like this is said.

Although Claire and Skyler were able to identify examples of teachers' ideologies about race and examples of enacted racism in the classroom, other students did

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not write about similar experiences or discuss the presence and function of racism in elementary grades.

The diversity of opinions or ideas about race seemed to problematize race further for the preservice teachers. Representative quotes included, “Lots of people have strong opinions which makes it controversial,” and “It’s hard to discuss because racism is still present today.” These example responses seemed to indicate that race becomes more difficult when beliefs differ across discussants. An interesting perspective was offered from a student who was on study abroad from Australia. Adam offered,

After being abroad in a country where race is the number one topic, I just became used to hearing and talking about race. Here in the U.S., it’s like a white elephant in the room.

**Preservice Teachers’ Beliefs about Race: Discussing Race**

Preservice teachers indicated that their willingness to discuss race varied depending on the group with which they were engaging a conversation. Students’ responses identified four potential circles of discussion that revealed strikingly different levels of interest/willingness to discuss race: family and friends, elementary students, students’ families, and university classmates.

*Family and friends.* Discussing race presented a complicated array of scenarios with family and friends. Written reflections and questionnaires revealed that pre-service teachers were generally willing to discuss race with friends or family who shared similar beliefs or with friends with which they were especially close. For example, one student explained, “For me, it’s easier to talk to family and friends about it because their views are similar.” They shared “it’s a usual thing for us to talk about” and “I consider race to be an open topic with family.” However, pre-service teachers expressed hesitation towards discussions with family members or friends that either held different beliefs about race or those that they did not know well. One student stated, “I have very strong values in this area, and some of my family has strong opposing views; although I feel confident to talk about it, I may not feel comfortable.” Still for a number of preservice teachers, race was a “touchy subject” regardless of the relationship they held with individual friends and family members.

Preservice teachers’ ideas about conversations with friends and family regarding race revealed varying degrees of difficulty based on who the conversation is with and what aspect of race or what race the conversation is concerning. One student explained,

With my friends definitely. But with family, it really depends on the subject concerning race.

Another student offered a similar explanation: “It depends on which race the con-

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versation is about." Others disclosed, "I get pretty mad with some family members who are close-minded," and "Only if we are all the same race." In considering discussing race with family and friends, preservice teachers pointed to the role of relationships in deciding who they would or would not feel comfortable having conversations with about race. As Karen explained, "I am more comfortable talking about race with friends and family because we typically have similar backgrounds, beliefs and ideas." In summary, preservice teachers seemed to have different idea about discussing race with elementary students and students' families than with their own friends and family.

*Elementary students.* In all three courses, preservice teachers' fear of offending and propensity to avoid conversations about race was also demonstrated in their responses related to tackling race with their own elementary students and students' families. When asked to consider the role of race and their ideas about discussing race in the elementary classroom, they suggested that doing so was either controversial or risky. They cited competing ideas and race as a complex concept as factors that complicated potential discussions about race. Moreover, preservice teachers in each class believed that race is too complicated for elementary students to understand or discuss. The following excerpt from an online discussion illustrates preservice teachers' beliefs about discussing race in the elementary classroom:

*Meredith:* It is too controversial; I mean, depending on the subject, I guess if it works with the curriculum, but if not, it is just too controversial.

*Josie:* I think like the Civil Rights Movement—that should be discussed, but no, race

shouldn't be discussed for just a random conversation. It gets too controversial.

*Tate:* It's too controversial, and talking about race is not just black and white. I mean, I would never teach Kindergarten about the violence of the Civil Rights Movement. So I think it can be controversial depending on the content and the age level.

*Caroline:* I think that there is a right way and a wrong way to discuss it. Absolutely discuss it, but do it without stepping on any toes to create conversation.

*Skyler:* We make it controversial because everyone tries so hard to not offend each other. Let's face it, everyone cares and worries so much about it, and really, so much is based on race.

Preservice teachers in each class believed that elementary students' home environment informed their beliefs about race and therefore, they perceived race discussions in elementary school as controversial. In a second online discussion, Jess and Alese explained:

*Alese:* I am still nervous to talk to my students about controversial topics like race because I think I will get in trouble.

*Jess:* Many people have strong opinions and some of those people could be your students or their family.

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*Alese:* I strongly agree with that, because you don't really know the kids' or their families' beliefs.

*Jess:* Children come with all different beliefs.

As illustrated in this discussion, preservice teachers demonstrated hesitations about discussing race, often citing fear of offending and concerns about classroom families' beliefs about race.

Because of the perceived inflammatory nature of conversations about race, preservice teachers like Lauren, believed that discussing race with children is inappropriate. She maintained,

I believe that racism and biases are started because children are introduced to these things. Children are open books and discussing race turns so many pages...close the book and children start to pay attention to other things.

Likewise, for preservice teachers like Jenn, creating and facilitating such discussions is challenging. She admitted, "I don't know how to discuss race outside of the context of the Civil Rights Movement." One student passionately explained,

It is a scary topic to tackle with students because...it is so controversial! I wouldn't want to step on any toes.

Explanations like "I am not sure of students' backgrounds and I don't want to offend," "I'd rather avoid it," and "I don't want to ruffle any feathers" imply that preservice teachers in each class feared that problems would ensue if they choose to discuss race with children.

In contrast, other preservice teachers believed that conversations related to race should be embraced, regardless of potential conflict with such classroom discussions. For example, this discussion segment demonstrates how preservice teachers' perceived discussions of race in the elementary grades:

*Rylie:* I feel like it doesn't have to be controversial in the elementary classroom as long as the classroom is inviting.

*Jenn:* I think that race should definitely be discussed; children shouldn't stay sheltered from reality forever. They should seek to know what went on and is still going on with race today.

*Claire:* It is important to make students aware. They need to know that it is an issue of everyday life, and that should be taught in our classrooms.

Others pointed to the reality of differences and how differences in race should be broached in the elementary setting. For instance, Meredith urged, "It should be out in the open that we are all different, and children should be introduced to this at a young age." Alese continued, "Students already know they are all different, so it should be discussed."

*Students' families.* In comparison to elementary students, preservice teachers

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were more comfortable discussing race with students' families. Questionnaire responses revealed that 35% of preservice teachers were not comfortable talking to classroom parents about race. Of those who were not comfortable, explanations were offered. Representative responses are illustrated in Table 3.

Others suggested in online discussions that broaching race with families may lead to uncomfortable conversations. For example, one group explained:

*Toby*: I don't know how the parents will react if we talk about race, and really, I will have to deal with them for the rest of the year. I don't want to create tension with parents.

*Blair*: Talking with parents is intimidating anyways much less bringing up race.

*Alice*: I know I have to be very careful because of parents and how things can be misinterpreted.

*Jess*: I am terrified of disapproving parents!

*Susanne*: Only if there was a problem with their child would I ever discuss race with a parent.

These excerpts indicate that while the majority of preservice teachers were comfortable discussing race with students' families, others perceived conversations about race with classroom families as potentially offensive. To avoid offending their students or students' families, these preservice teachers stated that they would avoid the conversations altogether.

*University classmates*. Preservice teachers revealed that discussing race with university classmates is complicated, and in general, students' comments related to talking about race with school peers revealed hesitation or avoidance with less familiar classmates. A few students stated that they were comfortable discussing race in class, sharing, "As long as people agree to disagree and take nothing too personal, and the topic is handled civilly, I'm ok with that," and "I don't mind talking about touchy subjects like race with classmates as long as people are open to listening to others; otherwise, it's just banging your head against the wall." While only 9% of preservice teachers indicated in the questionnaire that they were uncomfortable

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**Table 3**  
***Preservice Teachers Beliefs about Discussing Race with Students' Families***

- I would just rather avoid that!
- I am afraid to offend parents.
- It's too difficult to talk to parents about race.
- It's a lot easier to offend an adult when discussing race than a child.
- I would be afraid to offend parents more than the students.
- I feel like I haven't necessarily learned the proper way to talk about such a controversial topic with the parents of my students.
- I don't even know how I would go about doing this!

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taking part in discussions about race with their university classmates, their written reflections and online discussions indicated that discussions about race with peers were complicated. Their stance seemed to depend on what classmates they were talking with about race. In an online discussion, one group shared:

*Nancy:* It depends on what races are in the room and it depends on the class.

*Erin:* I am comfortable discussing race with our cohort, but not with a random class.

*Sarah:* I agree. I feel that our cohort is extremely honest but still loving to one another.

In a different group, one student echoed the relationship factor in discussing race with classmates. She offered, “I am comfortable talking about it [race] in this class because have a close relationship with my classmates this semester.” These representative responses suggest that within a class where relationships have developed, preservice teachers feel comfortable discussing race whereas with other school peers, they would not be comfortable holding the same conversations.

For other preservice teachers, the teacher education classroom seemed to present a different sort of uncomfortableness. Jenn recognized,

I think that it is difficult to talk about race with my peers in teacher education, because we are all so self-conscious about what we say, and we worry about whether or not what we say will offend somebody. Also, we are so quick to judge and condemn someone else when they hold a different opinion than ourselves.

Others reported that they felt their classmates in teacher education courses were not open in discussions about race, noting “I feel like some of our classmates hold back” and “people get sensitive with racial topics.” Yet, other students revealed that their own hesitations ultimately hinder university classroom conversations about race, including those with their tight-knit cohort. They explained:

*Katie:* I am too afraid to hurt anyone. I have had negative experiences with it in classes.

*Amy:* I just wouldn’t want to offend anyone or hold a heated debate about race.

*Heather:* I will participate, but, it’s not my first choice of topics.

***Preservice Teachers’ Beliefs about Race: Colorblindness and Whiteness***

Preservice teachers also articulated beliefs related to colorblindness and Whiteness. While a small number of preservice teachers voiced that discussions about race are central to teaching and learning in the elementary grades, peers expressed that talking about race is “about accepting other cultures” and “We’re all the same.” One student asserted that among Whites, race is not present; she explained, “I don’t believe race is in my (teacher education) classroom, because we are all White.” Similarly, Toby offered,

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This class is made up of all White people, therefore I do not see that my Whiteness has a big impact on my class or on our teacher education program, and I don't believe my own Whiteness has a big influence on my upcoming student teaching or future teaching. The large majority of teachers at my school are White so I do not stand out as being the minority. Therefore I don't see it having a big impact on the school or the students. I think where I teach during my first year will determine how big of an impact my race will have. If I am the minority among the other teachers in the school then I believe students will react to me differently.

Toby's ideas about race varied based on the race of others present in the setting, demonstrated in his idea that his Whiteness is less influential with other Whites but very influential with students or teachers of other races. Similarly, when the three groups of predominantly White preservice teachers discussed how race operates in the elementary classroom, their responses focused on classrooms where students were racially diverse, but no students acknowledged the presence or function of race in classrooms that are dominated by one race.

Even as a few preservice teachers recognized Whiteness as one factor associated with race, most did not articulate an understanding of their own Whiteness in the study. For example, Alese maintained, "It [discussions about race] should happen, especially in schools that are mostly White, because those kids are usually not aware." Although Alese identified the function of Whiteness in elementary schools here, she does not seem to recognize or connect this to her own Whiteness or the function of it in her own classes. Those who shared schooling and childhood experiences with other children of different races, however, found the majority White class at the university to be a challenge. Emory shared,

It is still a culture shock to me to be in a classroom with only White people. It sounds weird to say because my family is White, but it has been a challenge for me to get used to "all the White people." I guess family is just family and interactions happen naturally, but in the Teacher Ed. program, it has been hard for me to make the connections that I was able to make growing up in school.

Others asserted in questionnaire responses that race was not an important factor in the classroom, suggesting that "race does not define people." The following online discussion excerpt illustrates preservice teachers' assertions of colorblindness and Whiteness:

*Emory*: Students need to understand that race is not important, but negative issues concerning race are.

*Grace*: Race is only present physically and should not be acknowledged as anything more than that.

*Sarah*: I feel like my Whiteness does not really impact anything.

*Katie*: I have yet to see my Whiteness outwardly influence others in my program and internships.

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*Jess:* I really don't know what impact of being White is.

This conversation demonstrates that across the three groups, preservice teachers often failed to recognize or trouble their own Whiteness, the function of Whiteness, and that their claims of colorblindness further complicated their understanding of race in their lives and in the classroom. In summary, preservice teachers in each class sometimes broached Whiteness and at other times, claimed a colorblind approach to race; still several disregarded race as present or performing in education.

## **Discussion**

In this study, the preservice teachers perceived conversations about race as controversial, and in response, they were hesitant to talk about race and avoided such conversations altogether. This idea itself is problematic, to engage a classroom discussion about a concept that one perceives to be controversial with reservations about digging too deep or offending those involved in the conversation. Additionally, they held contrasting beliefs about discussing race with different groups of people (i.e., uncomfortable with students but comfortable with likeminded family and friends). Perhaps the most significant finding is the impact of students' ideas about race on their beliefs about discussing race in the elementary grades and with peers in teacher education. Study findings illustrated that preservice teachers' ideas about race as controversial impacted their beliefs about discussing race with elementary students and with peers in teacher education. When race was positioned within the elementary classroom, students appeared to believe that it was potentially more controversial than in the context of discussions with their peers and family members. Similarly, their level of comfort in discussing race in the teacher education setting was gauged by their relationships with peers. This collective reservation about discussing race paired with preservice teachers' beliefs about discussing race with others and their prior experiences with race illustrates opportunities for teacher educators to create experiences within and across courses that help preservice teachers identify and articulate their beliefs while also challenging their beliefs about race.

Preservice teachers indicated that their lived experiences and their racial identities influenced their ideas about race and discussing race with others. Regardless of whether their earliest lived experiences with race were positive or negative, participants seemed to make connections between their prior experiences with race and their current beliefs about race. However, White preservice teachers did not articulate that their lived experiences as Whites would later impact their teaching in elementary grades and overall, they articulated few connections to their own Whiteness in this study. The lack of diversity in teacher education only amplifies the impact of preservice teachers' beliefs about race on their future teaching.

As evidenced by their responses in the three data collection formats, preser-

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vice teachers seemed to perceive the avoidance of race, their “uncomfortableness” with discussing race, and race as controversial as normal. Furthermore, despite few conversations and examples of resistance to such norms, the pervasiveness of Whiteness in elementary teacher education and the functions of Whiteness in general were not broached. Whiteness ultimately seemed to lie under the surface for the preservice teachers, and as individuals or whole groups, they did not frequently acknowledge and then navigate and deconstruct the presence and function of Whiteness. Instead, a colorblind approach was sometimes maintained. Such assertions of colorblindness confirm the problem with preservice teachers’ colorblindness that is widely discussed by teacher educators (Haviland, 2008; Howard, 2006; Kumar & Hamer, 2013; Ladson-Billings, 1994; Sleeter, 1993, 2001) and further complicate the prevalence and avoidance of Whiteness in teacher education (Garrett & Segall, 2013). Moreover, this demonstrates the function of Whiteness and colorblindness in hindering preservice teacher change and action related to race, two desired outcomes of critical teacher education.

Although the majority of the preservice teachers did not demonstrate a marked development in their ideas or attitudes about race, efforts to intentionally begin the conversation using the questionnaires and then continue it through online discussions and individual written reflections seemed to contribute to experiences with race where preservice teachers were able to identify and articulate their beliefs while recognizing others’ beliefs. The intentional positioning of race in the teacher education classroom as well frequently returning to race as a concept to discuss together and think about seemed to help some students to engage the discussions held in class. However, the recurrence of race and race conversations as potentially problematic joined with hesitation and avoidance indicates that, as documented in recent studies (Darden, 2009; Williams & Evans-Winters, 2005), race continues to be a challenging topic with preservice teachers.

## **Implications for Future Teaching and Research**

### ***Implications for Teaching***

Given the prevalence of White preservice teachers (Causey et al., 2000; Sleeter, 2001), this study offers several implications for teaching in teacher education. First, this study effectively positions the use of questionnaires and online discussions to examine elementary teachers’ beliefs about race. Second, it confirms previous findings from earlier research (see for example Kumar & Hamer, 2013; Marx, 2004; Sleeter, 1993) that White preservice teachers often seem unaware of the function of their own Whiteness, even in conversations focused on Whiteness (Gillespie et al., 2002). As a result, they may claim a colorblind approach to race or resist conversations related to race (Garrett & Segall, 2013). Their avoidance of Whiteness and asserted colorblindness illustrates the need for such experiences in teacher education, and should provoke teacher educators to position deliberate

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course experiences with race that unpack both concepts, regardless of the course focus or content. One effective approach is to blend preservice teachers' tasks in the university classroom with their fieldwork in local elementary schools. For example, course instructors could position a reflective journaling component of their course in conjunction with a child case study or observations in the field. Likewise, students might interview teachers and children to identify their ideas about race and then use the interview texts to elicit structured discussions during course meetings. Through more purposeful blending of field placements and coursework, teacher educators can couch recurring opportunities for discussions and reflection related to race, Whiteness, and colorblindness that also encourage preservice teachers begin to unpack their own positionalities.

Third, drawing on prior findings in predominately White settings (Glazier, 2003; Kumar & Hamer, 2013; Marx, 2004; Williams & Evans-Winters, 2005), this study confirms how the racial makeup of the group under study can influence the resulting discussions of race. As 96% of the participants were White, this group's dominant White presence impacted how the preservice teachers approached and then discussed race. Fourth, this study demonstrates that preservice teachers will likely require recurring opportunities across a semester to engage with peers and consider their own beliefs. As the literature illustrates, experiences with race in teacher education are likely to be more meaningful when exercised across multiple courses rather than a single course (Brown, 2004; Cooper, 2007; Gomez & White, 2010; Milner, 2006), further illustrating the advantage of blending course and field experiences. Finally, this study confirms prior findings related to how White pre-service teachers perceive race as controversial (see for example Gomez & White, 2010) and contributes to the conversation about how teacher educators can craft course experiences that engage preservice teachers in identifying and articulating their beliefs about race.

This study identified instructional strategies that help preservice teachers examine race. Preservice teachers should be given continual opportunities for both oral and written reflection and whole and small group discussions. Similar to Brown's (2004) findings, using written reflections and questionnaires as modes of self-examination seemed to support preservice teachers' work with race. While many preservice teachers seemed to do their best thinking out loud with others (Turnbull & Mullins, 2007) many required time to consider the question or concept being addressed. As a result, strategies like online discussion forums and written reflections provide the time that preservice teachers needed to respond as well as a less confrontational platform than face to face discussion.

While this study confirms several findings in prior scholarship, it also challenges two aspects of earlier research. This study challenges Glazier's (2003) findings related to White participants' tendency to stick with "safe topics" during discussions by illustrating how White preservice teachers dialogued their beliefs about race with others and at times, attempted to unpack Whiteness. Additionally,

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participants in Glazier's study continually moved away from the topic of race. Similarly, preservice teachers in this disclosed that they also avoided conversations about race with particular groups. However in this study, they worked to examine race and then discuss race with peers. Perhaps the difference in the two studies is that in this study, I posed direct questions about race to the discussants, whereas in Glazier's study, participants began and developed conversations in their choice of directions.

This study addressed the following gaps in educational research: elementary preservice teachers' childhood and schooling experiences with race, their beliefs about positioning race in the classroom and their beliefs about discussing race with a variety of audiences. Additionally, this study illustrates the effectiveness of online discussion as a platform for elementary preservice teachers to articulate their thoughts about topics that are often considered controversial (Evans et al., 1999).

#### ***Implications for Future Research***

The study findings provide meaningful direction for future research related to White preservice teachers' and race. Future research that positions frequent opportunities to discuss, write about, and trouble their beliefs about race within and across courses may provide both a more in-depth examination of preservice teachers' beliefs about race as well as new directions for work that explores race with preservice teachers. For example, research that examines elementary preservice teachers' ideas about race within collaborative course and field experiences throughout a teacher education program would expand the literature. Also, future research that focuses on unpacking race as controversial may contribute to the ongoing conversation about preservice teachers and race. These study findings paired with implications for future research demonstrate potential for contributing to the ongoing conversation about White preservice teachers and race.

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## **Appendix A**

### **Questionnaire**

	Strongly Agree	Agree	Disagree	Strongly Disagree	Comments
I am comfortable talking about race with friends and family.					
I am comfortable talking about race with classmates.					
Race is a controversial topic.					
Race is a controversial issue in the classroom.					
Race should be discussed in the elementary classroom.					
Teachers should seek out and use a variety of materials that show racial diversity.					
I am comfortable talking about issues of race with my own students.					
I am comfortable talking about issues of race with parents in my classroom.					

How is race present in the classroom?

Is race important in social studies? Explain your answer.

How does race operate in the classroom?

What should a teacher consider if she/he is planning to talk about race with students?

As a student, what can the teacher or your peers do to make you feel more comfortable to talk about controversial issues like race?

What can the teacher or your peers do to make you feel uncomfortable talking about controversial issues like race?

## **Appendix B**

### **Written Reflection Questions and Online Discussion Prompts**

#### **Written Reflection Questions**

1. What have been the most influential events/experiences in your childhood/schooling that have impacted your attitude about race?
2. What have been the most influential events/experiences in college/internships that have impacted your attitude about race?

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#### Online Discussion Prompts

1. What do you believe is the impact/influence of Whiteness in general? In your current teacher education program/courses?
2. What do you think are the barriers to/difficulties with talking about race with (a) peers in teacher education, (b) students in your classroom, and (c. future parents in your classroom?
3. Some people talk about being "colorblind" or say that they do not "see" race. What are your thoughts about this? What do you think?